**The Sinking of the Lusitania**

The Lusitania made her maiden voyage from Liverpool to New York in September 1907. Construction had begun in 1903 with the goal of building the fastest liner afloat. Her engines produced 68,000-horse power and pushed the giant through the water at an average speed over 25 knots. Nicknamed the "Greyhound of the Seas" she soon captured the Blue Ribbon for the fastest Atlantic crossing.



The Lusitania leaves New York

May 1, 1915

The British Navy had secretly supported her construction and she was built to their specifications with the understanding that at the outbreak of war the ship would be used for government service. As war clouds gathered in 1913, the Lusitania quietly entered dry dock in Liverpool and was fitted for war service. This included the installation of ammunition magazines and gun mounts on her decks. The mounts, concealed under the deck, were ready for the addition of the guns when needed.

On May 1, 1915, the ship departed New York City bound for Liverpool. Unknown to her passengers but probably no secret to the Germans, almost all her hidden cargo consisted of ammunition and supplies destined for the British war effort. As the fastest ship afloat, the luxurious liner felt secure in the belief she could easily outdistance any submarine. Nonetheless, the threat of submarine attack reduced her passenger list to only half her capacity.



A contemporary illustration

of the sinking

On May 7, the ship neared the coast of Ireland. At 2:10 in the afternoon a torpedo fired by the German submarine U 20 slammed into her side. A mysterious second explosion ripped the liner apart. Chaos reigned. The ship leaned so badly and quickly that lifeboats crashed into passengers crowded on deck, or dumped their loads into the water. Most passengers never had a chance. Within 18 minutes the giant ship slipped beneath the sea. One thousand one hundred nineteen of the 1,924 aboard died. The dead included 114 Americans.

Walter Schwieger was captain of the U-Boat that sank the Lusitania. He watched through his periscope as the torpedo exploded and noted the result in his log, "The ship stops immediately and heals over to starboard quickly, immersing simultaneously at the bow. It appears as if the ship were going to capsize very shortly. Great confusion is rife on board; the boats are made ready and some of them lowered into the water. In connection therewith great panic must have reigned; some boats, full to capacity are rushed from above, touch the water with either stem or stern first and founder immediately."



An American victim is buried

in Queenstown (Cobh), Ireland

May 25, 1915

In the ship's nursery Alfred Vanderbilt, one of the world's richest men, and playwright Carl Frohman tied life jackets to wicker "Moses baskets" holding infants in an attempt to save them from going down with the ship. The rising water carried the baskets off the ship but none survived the turbulence created as the ship sank to the bottom. The sea also claimed Vanderbilt and Frohman.

The sinking enraged American public opinion. The political fallout was immediate. President Wilson protested strongly to the Germans. Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, a pacifist, resigned. In September, the Germans announced that passenger ships would be sunk only with prior warning and appropriate safeguards for passengers. However, the seeds of American animosity towards Germany were sown. Within two years America declared war.

"The Sinking of the Lusitania, 1915," EyeWitness to History, www.eyewitnesstohistory.com (2000).